DCCUMENT RESUME

ED 153 944 SP 012 245

AUTHOR Robinson, Christine Emilie
TITLE The Uses of Order and Discrder in Play: An Analysis of Vietnamese Refugee Children's Play.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 19p.; Published in "Play: Arthrcpclcgical Perspectives" by Leisure Press, P. O. Bcx 3, West Point, New York 10996 ($8.95)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Pcstage.
DESCRIPTORS American Culture; *Childrens Games; *Cultural Differences; *Indochinese; *Play; *Playgrcund Activities

ABSTRACT

Several characteristics cf children's play were noted by observing the playgrcund activities cf Vietnamese refugee and American children. The Vietnamese children tended tc participate in highly structured games while their American peers citen chose spcntanecus play--games with structures that gc beycnd cr destrcy rules. It is suggested that Vietnamese children avcid spcntaneous play with their American peers because they dc rct understand the rules well enough to break them. Instead, they chccse tc engage in play fcrms that strengthen social relaticns cr clarify sccial rules. In a static society, rule-governed play may be the ultimate play form, but in a changing society, spcntarecus play prepares a child to beccme flexible and adaptive to change. In this sense, Vietnamese boys have an advantage cver Vietnamese girls as they are mcre willing than the girls to engage in the rule-gcverned games, a prerequisite for later spcntaneous play. (MM)

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The Uses of Order and Disorder in Play:
An Analysis of Vietnamese Refugee Children's Play

Christine Emilie Robinson

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Adults often assume that children freely join play groups and will be able to play as long as they know the game rules. However, some play forms demand a cultural sophistication which many children do not have. By sophistication I mean more than knowing the rules; some games require knowing the rules so well you can ignore or distort them. The rules referred to are not merely game rules; they are social rules which shape non-play behavior and influence children's behavior in play. These games are the spontaneous, seemingly structureless activities in which children chase, wrestle and taunt each other, enjoying freedom from everyday social restraints.

These data are based on observations of the play of nine to twelve year old Vietnamese refugee children in four San Francisco area schools.[1] Simple observation shows that Vietnamese children are developing American social skills in play. However, on closer observation it becomes clear that their participation in play is limited by their unfamiliarity with American culture. A major difference between Vietnamese children's play and the play of their American peers lies in their play preferences. Vietnamese children tend to choose

highly structured games for the security of the structure, even though their American peers often choose games with structures they can destroy.

The school experience of Vietnamese refugee children varies greatly. The four schools I chose for observation have student populations ranging from predominantly White to predominantly Black. School programs for limited-English speaking students range from all day English as a Second Language programs to limited or non-existent special language programs.

Despite the differences in school environments, I found two patterns in the play of Vietnamese children. First, Vietnamese boys have very different patterns of play involvement than Vietnamese girls. All Vietnamese boys play actively, while few girls participate in play or games. Secondly, Vietnamese children play rule-governed games almost exclusively. They rarely participate in the spontaneous, free-flowing play created by their peers.

These patterns reflect two common notions about play. First, boys and girls in most cultures have different play patterns (Sutton-Smith & Roberts 1962), and secondly, the play of nine to twelve year olds is often described as rule-governed (Piaget 1962). The play preferences of Vietnamese children reflects these characteristics perfectly, but the play preferences of their peers conform less closely.

Sex Differences in Play Involvement

Part of the difference between the Vietnamese boys' and girls' participation rests in the nature of traditional boys and girls games. Certain games that are labelled "boys'games" and girls'games" have existed for generations. Boys'games are tratitionally aggressive and competitive, while girls'games are passive and accommodating (Sutton-Smith, Rosenberg & Morgan 1963). When asked what they played in Vietnam, most boys said soccer, while girls said jumprope and badminton (Robinson 1976). Play experience in Vietnam paralles the experience of American boys and young girls, but American girls over nine years of age are often not satisfied with passive traditional girls' play.

By the age of nine, many American girls are discontent with their role on the playground. Their traditional games do not offer them the challenges they used to offer. After several years of jumprope and hopscotch, most girls have reached the game's skill ceiling. Meanwhile, girls have not developed the skills needed for extended competitive games and seem envious of boys' deep involvement in play (Lever 1976). For these reasons, girls often list "bugging the boys" as a favorite pastime.

Most playground activities geared to children over nine years of age are competitive and aggressive. Team sports take on new importance to fourth graders. Boys' games build progressively toward competitive team sports, but girls learn to sublimate

aggression and competition in their early play. Girls learn cooperation in order to play together, not to cooperate for a desired goal, such as winning a game. Boys' team sports, in contrast, require cooperation for success. Boys are able to combine cooperation, competition and aggression in their games, but these behaviors are at odds in girls' play. Girls rarely sustain games which require cooperation, competition and aggression. Thus, they frequently turn to spontaneous play to release aggression (Robinson n.d.).

Vietnamese girls seem reluctant to participate in even slightly aggressive play. They often stand or sit near the games, participating vicariously. For example:

> Van[2] (fifth grade) was with a group of boys and girls standing on either side of a chain-link fence. They threw a frisbee from one side to the other. Children near the fence tried to intercept the frisbee as it went over the fence. Van leaned against the fence, near those who were leaping for the frisbee. She smiled, laughed and watched the game eagerly, but she did not participate. She was holding a brown shopping bag in one hand and never put it down to try to catch the frisbee. (Field notes 2/18/77 Black school 10:30-10:45)

In contrast, all of the Vietnamese boys play actively. They frequently play four-square, tag football and a modified basketball game. They play aggressively and competitively.

For example:

> Đinh and Thiet (fourth grade) were playing six-square (four-square with two additional players). The ball came low into the inside corner of Đinh's square. He lunged at the ball, fell forward onto his knees and left elbow but recovered the ball and kept it in play. Another ball came to him before he could get up, and he threw himself on his back to recover it. He got up, dusted off his hands and responded to the exclamations of the on-lookers with a look of "what else was I supposed to do? I had to get the ball." (ESL school 2/18/77 1:45-2:00)

The difference between Vietnamese boys' play and girls' play reflects both general sex differences in play and the specific play patterns of Vietnamese children. Vietnamese boys were prepared for competitive group play by playing soccer and other team sports in Vietnam, but girls' play experiences in Vietnam did not prepare them for the play of older American girls. They were familiar with structured, cooperative, non-competitive games which have been abandoned by their American peers. They seem unwilling to join in the brief, spontaneous chasing and taunting that marks much of the play of their peers.

Language limitations seem to be felt more strongly by Vietnamese girls because girls' play is generally more verbal than boys' play. As Millar points out, "Girls are, generally speaking, linguistically more skilful from an early age than boys in our society, and when they are aggressive, tend to use

their tongues rather than their fists "(1968, 196). Differences in verbal style are particularily evident in interactions at the predominantly Black school. When asked who she plays with after school, Van said, "My sister. I don't have many friends. I don't like the Black kids very well; they are too mean. They say mean things to me.They use bad words." (home visit 3/4/77)

One conclusion from this study is that Vietnamese girls rely less on play for social interactions than do boys. Vietnamese girls interact with other girls on the playground, but their interactions are usually limited to talking to one or two girls, whereas boys play with large groups of boys. The girls' limited participation in play may have significance for their adaptation to American culture because they cut off an important channel of social learning. They do not learn game rules which can be transferred to social rules. Avoidance of games with rules may have repercussions on Vietnamese girls' confidence to later play with the rules.

Preference for Rule Governed Games

All Vietnamese boys play during recess, but they limit their play participation to rule governed games. When Vietnamese girls play, they also play rule governed games. Free-flowing, spontaneous play exists on all of the playgrounds, but the Vietnamese children choose rule governed games instead. Since they are free to choose their play activity, there must be a reason why they prefer rule governed games to spontaneous play. It seems that the security of rule governed games is

attractive to Vietnamese children. Their limited knowledge of more subtle rules of play in the United States makes the freedom of spontaneous play somewhat frightening.

The structure of each activity determines whether it is a game or play. Games are relatively predictable. They are governed by a set of predetermined rules; participation is geared to a known goal (making baskets, scoring points, gaining territory, etc.). Quite often games are competitive. Play, on the other hand, does not have clearly defined rules or roles for participants. No one wins in play and players are free to come and go without destroying the shape of the activity.

According to Piaget, children are cognitively unable to play rule governed games until after they are seven years old. They remain interested in rule governed games into adulthood because these games are the "ludic activity of the socialized being" (1962, 142). Piaget goes on to say:

> In a general way it can be said that the more the child adapts himself to the natural and social world the less he indulges in symbolic distortions and transpositions because instead of assimilating the external world to the ego he progressively subordinates the ego to reality. (1962, 145)

The play of Vietnamese refugee children fits Piaget's model perfectly. The younger children (kindergarten and first graders) often play alone, creating the fantasies of solitary play, while the older children play rule governed games exclusively. This does not explain why the older Viet-

namese children's peers often play non-rule governed games. I suggest that they have learned the game rules and now enjoy turning the rules over and playing with deeper social rules and structures.

Vietnamese children choose play forms with well defined boundaries and well defined roles. They rely on the game's structure to clarify and define their position in relation to the other players. It is not clear if they are retreating from the confusion of learning a new culture into the safety of rules, or if they are pulled to a structure they can work within. According to Caillois, all game players try to eliminate confusion, "The confused and intricate laws of ordinary life are replaced in this fixed space and for this given time by precise, arbitrary,unexceptionable rules that must be accepted as such and that govern the correct playing of the game" (Caillois 1961, 7).

The role Vietnamese children take in decision making and conflict resolution also points to their desire for well defined boundaries. In most cases, Vietnamese children avoid threatening and poorly defined play interactions. They usually stand back while decisions are made and conflicts settled. For example:

> Pham (sixth grade) was playing four-square with a large blonde boy, an Asian boy and a Chicano boy. The blonde boy (best described as a bully) controlled the game. He

was standing in the first square bouncing the ball. Suddenly, he jammed the ball into Pham's square. Since Pham had no warning, he could not reach the ball in time, and he ran obediently onto the field to retrieve it. Meanwhile, the Asian boy stood up to the bully, saying that he hit the ball out. Their argument continued after Pham returned with the ball. Pham's only contribution to the discussion was to bounce the ball on a spot outside the square where he thought the ball landed. (White school 2/7/77 10:30-10:45)

Pham's reaction to the conflict was to let the other boy argue with the bully, although Pham was the injured party. His only involvement in the argument was to non-verbally emphasize the rules.

Vietnamese children often state rules when disputes arise, but they do not participate actively in arguments or discussions. They seem much more concerned with following the rules than in negogiating for better positions. Brian Sutton-Smith noticed a similar insistence on rules among first grade children. He says:

> The rules give the children a way of functioning as a group...As the players become more experienced in the ways of groups their attitude toward such rules can become more flexible. The very rigidity of the rules is a guarantor for the players against the chaos of their own and others' idiosyncratic behavior (1971, 89).

The Vietnamese children are like the young children described by Sutton-Smith; they too are uncertain about their

role in group play. Therefore, they want well defined roles in their play interactions.

The children who are fairly sure of their status on the playground and understand the social rules, create novel play situations by transcending and over-turning social rules. In contrast, children unfamiliar with American culture find rule governed games novel because they learn new social rules. D.E. Berlyne writes that we are most responsive to an intermediate degree of novelty. We are indifferent to situations that are either too remote or too familiar (1960, 21). Different criteria for novelty influence the play patterns of Vietnamese children and their American peers. A novel situation for an immigrant child may seem boring to an American child because it is too familiar, while a novel situation for an American child may be too foreign for an immigrant child.

Novel play forms for many children do not have pre-established rules and well defined boundaries and roles. These play forms will be referred to as spontaneous play. This play appears chaotic, but it has an underlying structure and unstated boundaries. Spontaneous play does not rely on rules to mark the distinction between play and non-play behavior. Instead, players create a "play frame" or a boundary between play and non-play behavior. A play frame is created through signalling an unstated message, "this is play"(Bateson 1972, 187). The players must understand the messages and the unstated boundaries in which they play because there are no rules to rely on.

The lack of rules and pre-established play patterns gives children freedom to do whatever they want and assume any role they please. This freedom can be frightening if the play frame is not carefully maintained and clearly understood.

Children's spontaneous play goes beyond preparing for future roles and understanding social relations. It actually allows children to "play with play." Children turn over the social order and expected behaviors and create disorder and chaos for the pure enjoyment of experiencing the unknown and otherwise unknowable (Sutton-Smith in press, Robinson n.d.).

Spontaneous play often involves what Clifford Geertz calls "deep play." People engage in deep play when the stakes are so high it is irrational to be involved in the activity (Geertz 1972). Children's play seems to involve fairly low stakes, except when spontaneous play turns upon the social structure and cultural norms. This would be the deepest of play if the social structure were static. The intensity and depth of spontaneous play is evident when a child's play frame breaks, and he or she asks, "is this play?" At this point, the child no longer enjoys the disorder in the play world and flees to the security of the rule governed, structured world.

Previous discussions of spontaneous play have not recognized the importance of a shared cultural base. New social structures and interactions intrigues those who are so secure in their culture they can think about changing it. If children do not fully understand the social structure and rules spontaneous

play turns against, play boundaries, infra-structures and signalling will not be strong enough to hold children in spontaneous play. Vietnamese children avoid spontaneous play with American peers because they do not understand the rules well enough to break them. They are still trying to establish boundaries and understand social relations in their everyday world. They engage in play forms that strengthen social relations and clarify social rules rather than participating in play that breaks down the social structure they are trying to build.

Children do not participate whole-heartedly in spontaneous play unless they are sure of the social rules they violate. Vietnamese children will gain this security by first mastering rule governed games. I do not mean they must become good athletes; rather, they must understand the rules along with what lies beneath the rules. A parallel development of rule manipulation occurs in children's riddling.

Children go through three stages in learning to riddle. They begin with learning the structure and linguistic rules and end with transcending and distorting the rules. First, children learn the linguistic code, in this case, the question/answer sequence. They enjoy asking riddles such as, "What two letters do Indians live in? T.P." Once the code is learned, they play with and distort the linguistic sequence by demanding answers that do not follow logically from the question, for example "What is black and white and read all over? A bloody zebra." Children eventually subordinate the linguistic code

to their interpersonal relations and substitute victimization as the proper response to the question. They ask a question such as, "Do you want a Hawaiian punch?" and follow it by punching the child in the face (McDowell 1974).

Conclusion

The development of riddling skills is analoguous to the development of play skills. Rules of proper speech or play behavior are learned in the first stage. At this time, children enjoy mastering rules they will use in daily life. Learning rules loses its novelty once children are proficient in them. Children then begin testing the sensation of rule distortion. Players are not bound by the rules because they are playing, either physically or linguistically. Eventually, the riddles or games transcend the limits of their codes. Communication in both cases goes beyond verbalization or patterned interaction into what Bateson calls "metacommunication" (Bateson 1972, 191).

Vietnamese children are essentually in the first stage, learning the linguistic and social codes. Vietnamese girls are at a disadvantage because they are avoiding both spontaneous play and rule governed games. They are like the child who never tells a riddle. They stand back and observe the social interactions of play, but they do not learn what it is like to participate in the play. The girls learn the social rules, just as the non-riddler learns the question/answer sequence, but they do not learn how to play with the codes. In contrast, Vietnamese boys are learning social rules through play and

may eventually know them well enough to play with them. These data suggest that Vietnamese boys will gain a deeper understanding of American culture than will Vietnamese girls because of their participation in play.

Vietnamese boys are learning American cultural rules through the informal channel of play. They will learn to play with the rules and adapt to changes in American society, if they go beyond rule governed games. Vietnamese girls, in contrast, are learning social rules through the more formal channel of school and adults. They may be less prepared for change than Vietnamese boys because school and adults do not give children an opportunity to play with the rules they have learned.

The difference between Vietnamese and American children's play patterns points to another level of play beyond those recognized by Piaget. Children do not stop progressing in play once they have learned its rules. Rule governed games are an important aspect of play, but they are not the ultimate play form. They might be the ultimate form in a static, unchanging society, but today children must become flexible and adaptive to change. Spontaneous play offers them this opportunity.

Notes

1. Field work was conducted from October 1976 through March 1977. Twenty two Vietnamese children were enrolled in the four schools; twelve of them were in the 4-6th grades.
2. Names have been changed. Schools will be referred to by their ethnic make-up, except one school will be called ESL school because the Vietnamese children only play with other limited English speaking children.

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